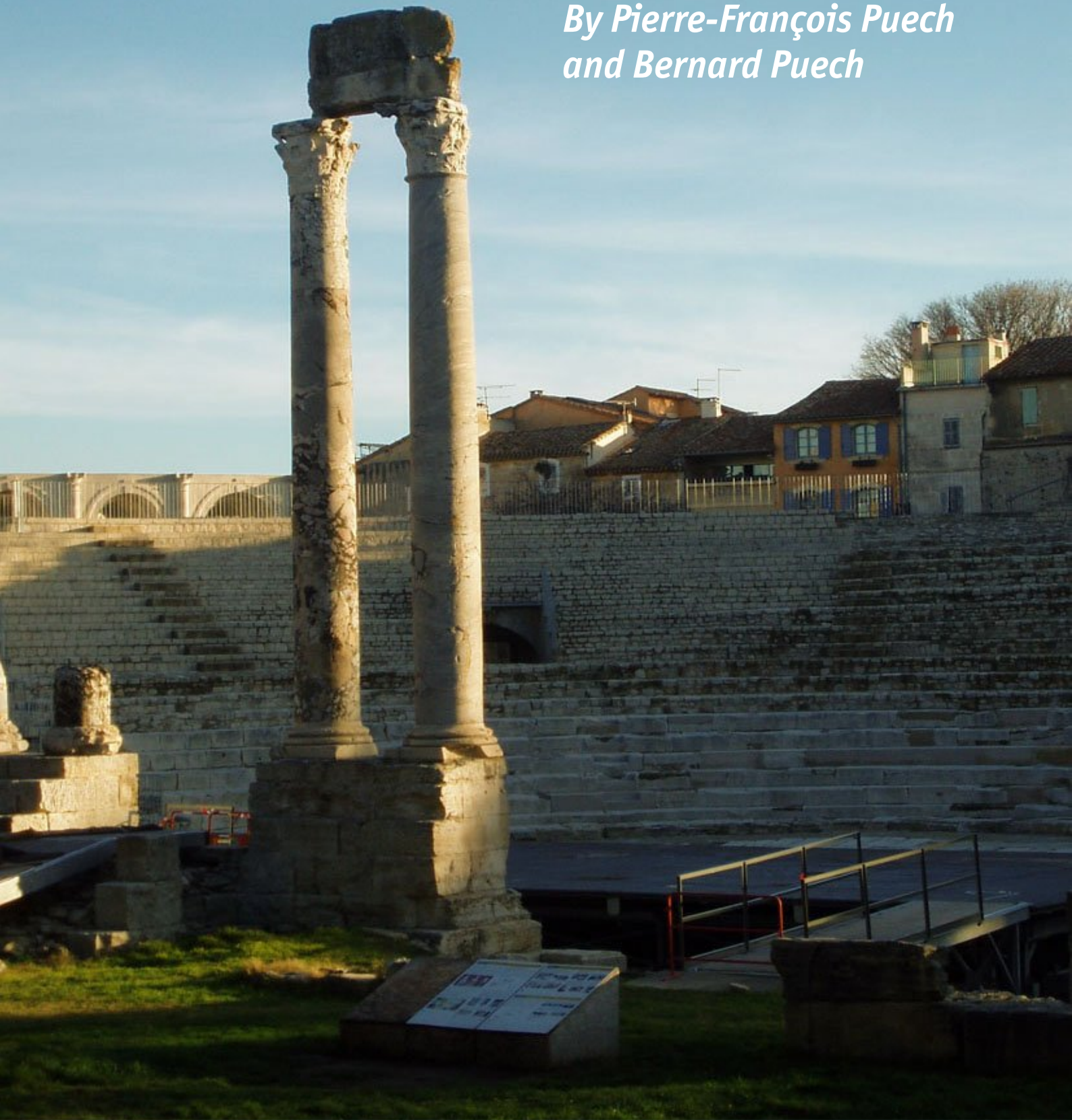


THE CONSERVATION OF CONTEXT

Montmaurin, the Venus of Arles and Mozart for Eternity

*By Pierre-François Puech
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The exhibit of objects in museums opens by its very presence a reflection on conservation. Always present there, these objects have the vocation of describing the world, as most of them are often deemed worthy of representing a generalization. Should we consider, like Nathalie Sarraute (1900-1999) wrote in "Do You Hear Them?" [1] that the gaze of the devotees gives a patina to the objects and that the care of generations of conservators simply guarantees their survival?

The conservator safeguards, maintains and ensures. The profession combines technical, scientific and artistic responsibilities to ensure the preservation of our natural and cultural heritage for future generations. Responsible for classifying and presenting to the public what is considered important for future generations, the conservator is also a *curateur* (from the Latin *curare* = to cure). Thus, (s)he should eventually restore in order to save what is vulnerable. The methodology remains deliberately indistinct so that it can be adapted to each object and developed. From the viewer's side, however, conservation is made for all humankind and not only for specialists.

Conservation involves several categories but it always concerns the memory in matters of conscience and transmission. Linguists use the memory of words and compare languages. Thus, it is evident that action is often originated by words. For example, in Catalan, the word *peug*, meaning 'path', comes from *peu* whose Latin root is *ped*, where *peuada* = *senyal de peu*, or footprint. This is what René Puech (1914-1995) expressed by "What was the foot of the walker becomes the path". Do not let disappear the path that teaches us, so that we can look for what the objects say they are, and not for what they seem to say. It is the spirit that makes the error, so it must relate to the context of a discovery, be it an

object, an organized set of elements (a structure) or an organic ruin.

Recognising the contribution of context.

The context is defined as being everything that participates or contributes to the significance and particularity of the natural and cultural heritage. This definition requires the understanding, documentation and interpretation of the entire conservation context. To preserve this context we ought to implement the right tools to ensure a sustainable management. Legislation, regulations and guidelines were developed in support of the professional training, to help manage the way to conserve all the significance of the context.

What the objects say they are. The "conservation contract" has as first commandment: *Thou shalt not destroy*. Those who want to make the object speak should not change it. This was, however, the case of the skull of Mozart in 2008. The municipal institution of Mozarteum, which conserves it in its library, has conducted research that has destroyed two teeth and their alveolars (figure 1). As positive fact, the DNA analysis confirmed the previous anthropologic research that had demonstrated that the skull is male despite the frontal appearance which had once justified the doubts of some [2]. It is now certain that the particularities of the skull, which has a feminine aspect, are indeed distinctive to identify Mozart (image 2).

Taking advantage of this case, we should remember that what is used to conserve paintings and sculptures stored in museums, is desirable also for "world heritage" bones that should be conserved by professionals, aside their museological and scientific interest.

The conservation of different objects in the world. The philosopher says that in practice it is



Figure 1. Skull of Mozart before the 2008 analysis. The two premolars and the inscriptions which are part of the skull history are still present. © Puech P.-F./Puech B.



Figure 2. Skull of Mozart. The anatomical particularities, especially the appearance of the front, clearly identify Mozart. © Puech P.-F./Puech B.

the world that determines the object. Thus, the assertion about an object not only differs from one individual to another but also for the individual itself, according to the observation perspectives. In April 2008 in Toulouse, at a meeting of the Association *Sociétés Savantes*, the question of safeguarding the integrity of the natural and archaeological site of Montmaurin-Lespugue was discussed. With the “Venus of Lespugue”, work of the Gravettian modern man, and the “Montmaurin jaw”, a human remain of outmost significance for the Neanderthal man, the site has provided valuable evidences (figures 3 and 4). However, these discoveries are now seen as poorly understood due to the limited research and analysis techniques



Figure 3. The Montmaurin jaw. A human remain of outmost significance of the Neanderthal man. © Puech P.-F./Puech B.

at that time, hence the importance of safeguarding the context which should be classified as World Heritage [3].

The key for comprehension. At Arles, on June 6th, 1651 excavators digging a reservoir found the head of a Venus. Fragment by fragment, a Roman theatre was uncovered, which allowed to assume that the statue decorated the wall of the stage, made of a hundred columns (figure 5). In 1683 the city was forced to offer this Venus to Louis XIV. The sculpture, which can now be seen at the Louvre, was restored by François Girardon (1628-1715) who added arms and placed in its hands an apple and the handle of a mirror (figure 6). It was criticized that the sculptor repolished the statue, thus reducing its forms. Only later, the casting of the original (figure 7), which led to think that Girardon remodelled the whole statue, proved by its cracks that it was also restored due to its degradation during the French Revolution. At the time, the head was not well joint to the body and

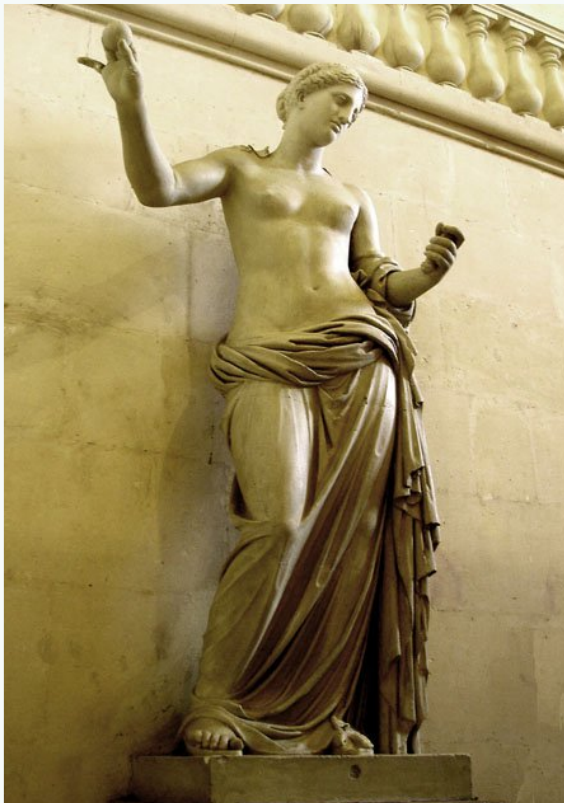


Figure 4. Replica of the Venus of Lespugue. Originally about 25,000 BC, in mammoth ivory, 150 mm. © Puech P.-F./Puech B.



Figure 5. Théâtre Antique d'Arles. Columns of the stage wall once adorned by the Venus. © Puech P.-F./Puech B.

Figures 6 and 7. Copy of the Venus restored by François Girardon (below, left); Venus of Arles. Original casting (below, right). © Puech P.-F./Puech B.



thus, a layer of plaster was applied to cover the entire statue, this being the reason for the so-called altered curves (figure 8).

The Venus of Arles, which is a copy of the lost Aphrodite of Cnidus by Praxiteles (a Greek sculptor active in the 4th century BC, whose sculptures are only known through Roman copies), had previously been consolidated by the application of struts on the exterior side of the right hip and on the right shoulder (figure 9). Girardon restored the moulding by removing the one of the hip and turning the one of the shoulder into a ribbon. The Venus of Arles is less voluptuous than the Venus de Milo, which saw the creation of the latter. Its style is more conventional in a way, to emphasize the sight of the face and to be less nude. This classicism, which gives primacy to the Venus of Arles over the Venus of Milo, is equally present in the mouth and the slightly heavy eyelids that resemble the Aphrodite of Cnidus, Praxitelean work without a doubt.



In conclusion, we always believe that a museum object is an object that speaks. No, the object was made and we tell about it, with the help of its context, which gives it the right perspective. These things belong to a country of all pasts. To understand them means to preserve them better. This way of continuance gives the impression of an afterlife that leads man to save the deceased objects from disappearing. Isn't conservation, thus, similar to the Egyptian practice of surrounding the body with objects that had perhaps intended to provide the very keys to the gates of eternity?



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1. N. Sarraute, "Do You Hear Them?", George Braziller, 1973, pp. 23
2. T.J. Parson, O. Loreille and B. Smith, "Army helps DNA scientists unravel Mozart mystery", ScienceBlog, 2008 [20-03-2009] www.scienceblog.com/cms/army_helps_dna_scientists_unravel_mozart_mystery_9713
3. Archaeological Society of Southern France, "Records of the Academic Year 2007-2008", pp.5-12

Figure 8. Venus casting before restoration. Alteration of the surface layer (upper left) and the strut of the right hip and other deteriorations of the plaster (lower left).

Figure 9. Venus of Arles. Detail showing the resemblance to the Aphrodite of Cnidus (below).

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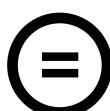
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